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ESCALATION IS NOT THE ANSWER

Whether you supported the invasion of Iraq or not (and I certainly did not support what I think is the dumbest, most unnecessary war since 1812), we must now confront two unpleasant facts. The first is that the Administration doesn't have a clue about how to bring the insurgency in Iraq to a successful conclusion. The second is that our unilateral blundering has left us more isolated in world affairs than at any time since the end of World War II.

Make no mistake. Our troops won the war. And Congress is never going to shortchange them in terms of funding or support. But the Administration's misguided policies have lost the peace. Our misadventure in Iraq has already lasted longer than our involvement in WWII, and American families are still paying the price.

We are indeed, in the words of the old Pete Seeger refrain, bogged down æœknee deep in the big muddyæœ and now the President wants to send even more American servicemen and women into harm's way.

Unfortunately, he has failed to grasp a key point made by the bipartisan Iraq Study Group â€“ that what happens *militarily* in Iraq is a result of what is, or is not, happening on the *political* front.

That means that unless the political situation improves substantially there is little hope for Iraq over the long term. Even General Abizaid and General Casey have said that under these conditions sending more troops to fight in Iraq is not the answer.

The President

should have listened to General Shinseki three and a half years ago and used many more troops to pacify Iraq after the war was over, but he missed that opportunity and now the genie is out of the bottle. His call for a military build-up now is too late and at this point will be counter-productive.

In fact, we would simply be providing more American targets and stretching our military to the breaking point for no strategic gain.

That this reality hasn't registered with the Administration shouldn't come as a surprise. I have pointed out before that while President Bush, Vice-President Cheney, and the other architects of this disaster, like Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, and Perle, like to view themselves as being tough-minded realists, in reality they are zealous romantics.

Their arrogance, their refusal to accept any kind of checks and balances, and their refusal to listen to dedicated military and intelligence professionals who were, and are, saying â€œNo, wait a minute â€“ Listen!â€” have led us to this crossroads.

In the Administration's rush to war the Congress did not meet its responsibilities to ask the right questions and neither did the press. But that does not mean that we shouldn't be asking the tough questions today about what our strategy is for building down and ending our involvement in Iraq.

Of course, one of the most frustrating questions I keep getting is “Well, Congressman, if you don’t agree with the President, what is your plan for getting out?” My response is, “You know, sometimes in life if you make a really bad mistake, there’s no good way to repair it.”

America’s situation in Iraq reminds me of the story about Eddie Stanky, the old New York Giant second baseman in the 1950’s.

The way the story goes, in spring training Leo Durocher, the Giant’s manager, was hitting ground balls to his infielders in practice and Stanky muffed two in a row.

Durocher grabbed the glove, trotted out to second base and said “Here kid, I’ll show you how it’s done.”

But the first ball hit to Durocher, he dropped.

In exasperation, Durocher turned to Stanky and said, “Stanky, you’ve got second base so screwed up nobody can play it!”

Today, think of Iraq as second base and George Bush as Eddie Stanky, and you’ve got the picture.

That’s a funny story, but what is happening to our troops in Iraq isn’t funny. And there is no good way out. No matter what course the Administration pursues in the end, the odds are that we will not have brought real democracy to the Middle East, but we will most certainly have contributed in a major way to destabilizing the region and strengthening Iran, the country we most need to contain.

I believe our best chance of salvaging anything out of this mess may be some variation of a proposal by Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter’s former National Security Advisor. His plan calls for us to tell the Iraqis that they have a matter of months to get their act together politically and to get a government that works.

When they've done that, the next step calls for them to ask us to begin to leave, making it clear that they are stepping forward to shoulder responsibility for future developments.

Then Iraq would convene a conference of regional powers, including Egypt, Syria, and Iran, to work out a regional understanding of mutual relationships after we're gone. Lastly, the international community would organize a donor's conference to raise the money needed to rebuild key sectors of the Iraqi economy.

At the same time, as the Iraq Study Group correctly pointed out, we need to get off the sidelines and make a serious effort to resurrect the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians. We are deceiving ourselves if we believe we can develop a decent working relationship with countries in the Middle East unless we address that long running conflict and Israel will not be safe in a Middle East that is devoid of significant American influence in the region. The best way to gain influence with rational elements in the Arab world is to renew America's traditional role as both a friend of Israel and an honest broker in moving the peace process forward. And we must be willing to talk to any country in the Middle East in order to bring any degree of stability and civility to the region.

That may or may not work. The odds against anything working are high. But it is probably our best hope. It will be very difficult for the Congress to prevent the President from proceeding with his escalation because as commander-in-chief he calls the shots when it comes to military operations. But we must try. Not only will his plan not produce the desired result in Iraq, it will further sap our military readiness and will impose even more hardships on military families and the guardsmen and reservists who will see their lives disrupted even more than they have already.

*Dean of the Wisconsin Congressional Delegation,
Congressman Dave Obey represents Wisconsin's 7th
Congressional District and serves as the Chairman of the
House Appropriations Committee.*

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